

Acts: Catching up with the Spirit

Session Five: Saints around the edges

Agenda:

- Opening Prayer
- Video (15 minutes)
- Discussion of one or more of these “saints”:
 - Stephen: Acts 6:8-15; 7:54-60
 - Tabitha (Dorcas): Acts 9:36-42
 - Barnabas: Acts 4:36-37; 9:26-28; 11:19-26)
 - Rhoda: Acts 12:5-17
 - Priscilla and Aquila: Acts 18:1-4, 24-27
- Closing prayer

Stephen: Acts 6:8-15; 7:54-60

1. Why do you think Luke says Stephen performed “great wonders and signs” (Acts 6:8) without specifying what they were?
2. Stephen was the church’s first martyr. The word martyr derives from the Greek word for “witness.” Stephen was also one of the church’s first deacons (Acts 6:5). The word deacon (although not used by Luke in Acts 6) derives from the Greek word for “service.” What connections can you make between service and martyrdom?
3. Skinner notes that Stephen gives the longest speech in Acts. Read or skim Stephen’s speech in Acts 7:2-53. What are its main themes and points? How would you describe its tone? What, if anything, about his speech surprises or troubles you? What does Stephen’s speech reveal about him and his faith?
4. Compare Luke’s account of Stephen’s arrest, trial, and death to Luke’s account of Jesus’ suffering (especially in Luke 22:66–23:5 and 23:34, 44-47). Why does Luke present Stephen’s experience in ways that mirror Jesus’ experience?
5. Skinner states Stephen “establishes a pattern for what all disciples can expect.” How, if at all, has your life followed that pattern?
6. While Christians in the United States are free to worship and serve Christ, persecution and martyrdom persist in the church worldwide. What do you know about Christian martyrs elsewhere? (You may wish to look at such websites as The Voice of the Martyrs, <https://www.persecution.com/>). How do these modern-day martyrs’ experiences give you insight into Stephen’s experience? How do they influence your own faith and works?

Tabitha (Dorcas): Acts 9:36-42

1. Why do you think Luke says Tabitha performed “good works and compassionate acts” (verse 36 CEB) without specifying what they were?
2. Skinner infers from Luke’s mention of this woman’s two names— Tabitha (Aramaic) and Dorcas (Greek)—that she was a “bridge builder” in her diverse community. Who builds bridges of connection and understanding between different people in your

faith community? in your larger community? How do you work to build such bridges yourself? How important is this bridge-building activity as part of the church's witness to Jesus?

3. Skinner calls the clothes Tabitha made "an intimate and caring gift" because they require personal, attentive knowledge of the recipient. When have you received that kind of gift from someone? When have you given that kind of gift?
4. Skinner writes, "Bringing [Tabitha] back to life validates the urgency of her work," which is providing the "leadership and material sustenance . . . that is supposed to dwell at the center of every Christian community." How does your church continue Tabitha's work today?

Barnabas: Acts 4:36-37; 9:26-28; 11:19-26

1. What encouraging actions does Barnabas take in these Scriptures?
2. Commenting on Barnabas's support of Saul (Paul), Skinner writes, "Barnabas sees the gifts that someone else possesses and makes sure they get used. . . . People like him always change the church's story." To whom in your congregation (or another congregation or community you've been part of) could these words also apply?
3. When have you seen another community member's gifts and potential and done something to encourage their use? What happened? How and when has someone done so for you?
4. Like Tabitha, Barnabas builds bridges—in Acts 11, between Jews and non-Jews. Skinner notes Barnabas "would be invaluable to the attempts to keep the different kinds of believers . . . unified in their new existence as Christians." Whom have you known or whom do you know of who has special gifts for promoting Christian unity? How have you been involved in attempts to keep different kinds of believers united?
5. Luke calls Barnabas "a good man" (Acts 11:24). In Luke 18:19 (CEB), Luke recorded Jesus asking, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except the one God." How do we recognize goodness in others? What does it mean to call a Christian a good person?
6. Likewise, what does it mean for a Christian to be "endowed with exceptional faith," and what criteria do (or ought) we use to recognize such believers?

Rhoda: Acts 12:5-17

1. Why do you imagine Peter doesn't fully realize what is happening to him as he is freed from prison? Why don't most of the people in Mary's house immediately realize what has happened, either?
2. Skinner writes about a colleague who sees Rhoda as a "comedic figure" in this story. What is your opinion of Rhoda?
3. How is Rhoda like the women who first testified to Jesus' resurrection (Luke 24:9-11, 22-24)? What conclusions, if any, might Luke want readers to reach by drawing the parallels?

4. Skinner points out Rhoda was a slave (the Greek word describing her, paidiské, is the same word with which Paul describes Hagar “the slave woman” in Galatians 4). “Rhoda’s story,” he writes, “reminds us not to idealize the early church.” Do you agree that we modern Christians tend to idealize our forebears in faith? Why or why not? How do such Scriptures as Galatians 3:26-29 and 1 Peter 2:18-22 shape our view of Rhoda’s position and early church practice?
5. Skinner praises Rhoda for taking her testimony and herself seriously: “She knows what she has seen and heard, and she won’t waver in declaring it until everyone else finally comes to know what she knows.” When have you shared Rhoda’s determination to testify to what you know, and when have others been like Rhoda to you?
6. Skinner states Rhoda “shows herself more willing to discover the power of prayer than anyone else.” How powerful do you believe prayer is? In general, do you approach prayer more like Rhoda, or more like those who doubt her report? Why? How, if at all, would you like your attitude toward prayer to change? How could your community help?

Priscilla and Aquila: Acts 18:1-4, 24-27

1. Skinner calls Priscilla and Aquila “a power couple in the early church.” Have you known “power couples” in the churches with which you’ve been involved? Who were or are they, and why do you consider them powerful?
2. Like Paul, Priscilla and Aquila “possessed the financial means and social expertise to be mobile” and spread the good news in many places. How does this Scripture support that statement? What fiscal resources and social connections, if any, have helped you be a witness to Jesus? What resources and connections does your church use to witness to and serve Jesus?
3. Skinner notes that in Acts’ second half, Luke names Priscilla before Aquila, probably indicating either “that she was the more prominent or gifted of the two or that she occupied a higher social stratum than her husband.” How does Priscilla challenge ancient and modern ideas about women’s roles in the church and at home?
4. Priscilla and Aquila instruct Apollos more fully and accurately in his faith. When and how have your fellow believers helped you more clearly understand and follow God’s way? Have you ever had occasion to teach faith “more accurately” to other Christians? How did that experience affect your own faith?